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The Templar Legacy

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

PARIS, FRANCE
JANUARY 1308

Jacques de Molay sought death, but knew salvation would never be offered. He was the twenty-second master of the Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon, a religious order that had existed under God's charge for two hundred years. But for the past three months, he, like five thousand of his brothers, had been a prisoner of Philip IV, king of France.

"You will stand," Guíllaume Imbert ordered from the doorway.

De Molay remained on the bed.

"You are insolent, even in the face of your own demise," Imbert said.

"Arrogance is about all I have left."

Imbert was an impish man with a face like that of a horse who, de Molay had noted, seemed as impassible as a statue. He was France's grand inquisitor and Philip IV's personal confessor, which meant he possessed the king's ear. Yet de Molay had many times wondered what, besides pain, brought joy to the Dominican's soul. But he knew what irritated him. "I will do nothing you desire."

"You have already done more than you realize."

That was true, and de Molay once more rued his weakness. Imbert's torture in the days after the October 13 arrests had been brutal, and many brothers had confessed to wrongdoing. De Molay cringed at

the memory of his own admissions—that those who were received in the Order denied the Lord Jesus Christ and spat upon a cross in contempt of Him. De Molay had even broken down and written a letter calling on the brothers to confess as he'd done, and a sizable lot had obeyed.

But just a few days ago emissaries from His Holiness, Clement V, had finally arrived in Paris. Clement was known to be Philip's puppet, which was why de Molay had brought gold florins and twelve pack horses laden with silver with him to France last summer. If things went awry, that money would have been used to buy the king's favor. Yet he'd underestimated Philip. The king longed not for partial tributes. He wanted all that the Order possessed. So charges of heresy had been fabricated and thousands of Templar arrests made in a single day. To the pope's emissaries de Molay had reported the torture and publicly recanted his confession, which he knew would bring reprisals. So he said, "I imagine Philip is presently concerned that his pope may actually have a backbone."

"Insulting your captor is not wise," Imbert said.

"And what would be wise?"

"Doing as we wish."

"And then how would I answer to my God?"

"Your God is waiting for you, and every other Templar, to answer." Imbert spoke in his usual metallic voice, which betrayed no vestige of emotion.

De Molay no longer wanted to debate. Over the past three months he'd endured ceaseless questioning and sleep deprivation. He'd been placed in irons, his feet smeared with fat and held close to flames, his body stretched on the rack. He'd even been forced to watch while drunken jailers tortured other Templars, the vast majority of whom were merely farmers, diplomats, accountants, craftsmen, navigators, clerks. He was ashamed of what he'd already been forced to say, and he wasn't going to volunteer anything further. He lay back on the stinking bed and hoped his jailer would go away.

Imbert motioned, and two guards squeezed through the doorway and yanked de Molay upright.

"Bring him," Imbert ordered.

De Molay had been arrested at the Paris Temple and held there since last October. The tall keep with four corner turrets was a Templar headquarters—a financial center—and did not possess any torture chamber. Imbert had improvised, converting the chapel into a place of unimaginable anguish—one that de Molay had visited often over the past three months.

De Molay was dragged inside the chapel and brought to the center of the black-and-white-checkered floor. Many a brother had been welcomed into the Order beneath this star-studded ceiling.

"I am told," Imbert said, "that this is where the most secret of your ceremonies were performed." The Frenchman, dressed in a black robe, strutted to one side of the long room, near a carved receptacle de Molay knew well. "I have studied the contents of this chest. It contains a human skull, two thighbones, and a white burial shroud. Curious, no?"

He was not about to say anything. Instead, he thought of the words every postulant had uttered when welcomed into the Order. *I will suffer all that is pleasing to God.*

"Many of your brothers have told us how these items were used." Imbert shook his head. "So disgusting has your Order become."

He'd had enough. "We answer only to our pope, as servants to the servant of God. He alone judges us."

"Your pope is subject to my liege lord. He will not save you."

It was true. The pope's emissaries had made clear they would convey de Molay's recanting of his confession, but they doubted it would make much difference as to the Templar's fate.

"Strip him," Imbert ordered.

The smock he'd worn since the day after his arrest was torn from his body. He wasn't necessarily sad to see it go, as the filthy cloth smelled of feces and urine. But Rule forbid any brother from showing his body. He knew the Inquisition preferred its victims naked—without pride—so he told himself not to shrink from Imbert's insulting act. His fifty-six-year-old frame still possessed great stature. Like all brother knights, he'd taken care of himself. He stood tall, clung to his dignity, and calmly asked, "Why must I be humiliated?"

"Whatever do you mean?" The question carried an air of incredulousness.

"This room was a place of worship, yet you strip me and stare at my nakedness, knowing that the brothers frown on such displays."

Imbert reached down, hinged open the chest, and removed a long twill cloth. "Ten charges have been leveled against your precious Order."

De Molay knew them all. They ranged from ignoring the sacraments, to worshiping idols, to profiting from immoral acts, to condoning homosexuality.

"The one that is of most concern to me," Imbert said, "is your requirement that each brother deny that Christ is our Lord and that he spit and trample on the true cross. One of your brothers has even told us of how some would piss on an image of our Lord Jesus on the cross. Is that true?"

"Ask that brother."

"Unfortunately, he was overmatched by his ordeal."

De Molay said nothing.

"My king and His Holiness were more disturbed by this one charge than all others. Surely, as a man born into the Church, you can see how they would be angered over your denial of Christ as our Savior?"

"I prefer to speak only to my pope."

Imbert motioned, and the two guards clamped shackles onto both of de Molay's wrists, then stepped back and stretched out his arms with little regard for his tattered muscles. Imbert produced a multi-tailed whip from beneath his robe. The ends clinked and de Molay saw that each was tipped with bone.

Imbert lashed the whip beneath the outstretched arms and onto de Molay's bare back. The pain surged through him then receded, leaving behind a sharpness that did not dull. Before the flesh had time to recover, another blow came, then another. De Molay did not want to give Imbert any notion of satisfaction, but the pain overcame him and he shrieked in agony.

"You will not mock the Inquisition," Imbert declared.

De Molay gathered his emotions. He was ashamed that he'd screamed. He stared into the oily eyes of his inquisitor and waited for what was next.

Imbert stared back. "You deny our Savior, say he was merely a man

and not the son of God? You defile the true cross? Very well. You will see what it is like to *endure* the cross."

The whip came again—to his back, his buttocks, his legs. Blood splattered as the bone tips ripped skin.

The world drifted away.

Imbert stopped his thrashing. "Crown the master," he yelled.

De Molay lifted his head and tried to focus. He saw what looked like a round piece of black iron. Nails were bound to the edges, their tips angled down and in.

Imbert came close. "See what our Lord endured. The Lord Jesus Christ whom you and your brothers denied."

The crown was wedged onto his skull and pounded down tight. The nails bit into his scalp and blood oozed from the wounds, soaking the mane of his oily hair.

Imbert tossed the whip aside. "Bring him."

De Molay was dragged across the chapel to a tall wooden door that once had led to his private apartment. A stool was produced and he was balanced on top. One of the guards held him upright while another stood ready in case he resisted, but he was far too weak to challenge.

The shackles were removed.

Imbert handed three nails to another guard.

"His right arm to the top," Imbert ordered, "as we discussed."

The arm was stretched above his head. The guard came close and de Molay saw the hammer.

And realized what they intended to do.

Dear God.

He felt a hand clamp his wrist, the point of a nail pressed to his sweaty flesh. He saw the hammer swing back and heard metal clang metal.

The nail pierced his wrist and he screamed.

"Did you find veins?" Imbert asked the guard.

"Clear of them."

"Good. He is not to bleed to death."

De Molay, as a young brother, had fought in the Holy Land when the Order had made its last stand at Acre. He recalled the feel of a

sword blade to flesh. Deep. Hard. Lasting. But a nail to the wrist was something altogether worse.

His left arm was pulled out at an angle and another nail driven through the flesh at the wrist. He bit his tongue, trying to contain himself, but the agony sent his teeth deep. Blood filled his mouth and he swallowed.

Imbert kicked the stool away and the weight of de Molay's six-foot frame was now borne entirely by the bones in his wrists, particularly his right, as the angle of his left arm stressed his right to the breaking point. Something popped in his shoulder, and pain pummeled his brain.

One of the guards grabbed his right foot and studied the flesh. Apparently, Imbert had taken care in choosing the insertion points, places where few veins coursed. The left foot was then placed behind the right and both feet were tacked to the door with a single nail.

De Molay was beyond screaming.

Imbert inspected the handiwork. "Little blood. Well done." He stepped back. "As our Lord and Savior endured, so will you. With one difference."

Now de Molay understood why they'd chosen a door. Imbert slowly swung the slab out on its hinges, opening the door, then slamming it shut.

De Molay's body was thrust one way, then another, swaying on the dislocated joints of his shoulders, pivoting off the nails. The agony was of a kind he'd never known existed.

"Like the rack," Imbert said. "Where pain can be applied in stages. This, too, has an element of control. I can allow you to hang. I can swing you to and fro. Or I can do as you just experienced, which is the worst of all."

The world was blinking in and out, and he could barely breathe. Cramps claimed every muscle. His heart beat wildly. Sweat poured from his skin and he felt as if he had the fever, his body a roaring blaze.

"Do you mock the Inquisition now?" Imbert asked.

He wanted to tell Imbert that he hated the Church for what it was doing. A weak pope controlled by a bankrupt French monarch had somehow managed to topple the greatest religious organization man had ever known. Fifteen thousand brothers scattered over Europe.

Nine thousand estates. A band of brothers that had once dominated the Holy Land and spanned two hundred years. The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and the Temple of Solomon were the epitome of everything good. But success had bred jealousy and, as master, he should have fully appreciated the political storms churning around him. Been less stiff, more bending, not so outspoken. Thank heaven he'd anticipated some of what had already occurred and taken precautions. Philip IV would never see an ounce of Templar gold and silver.

And he would never see the greatest treasure of all.

So de Molay mustered his last remaining bits of energy and raised his head. Imbert clearly thought he was about to speak and drew close.

"Damn you to hell," he whispered. "Damn you and all who aid your hellish cause."

His head collapsed back to his chest. He heard Imbert scream for the door to be swung, but the pain was so intense and swept into his brain from so many directions that he felt little.

He was being taken down. How long he'd hung he did not know, but the relaxation to his limbs went unnoticed because his muscles had long ago numbed. He was carried some distance and then realized that he was back in his cell. His captors laid him onto the mattress, and as his body sunk into the soft folds a familiar stench filled his nostrils. His head was elevated by a pillow, his arms stretched out at each side.

"I have been told," Imbert quietly said, "that when a new brother was accepted into your Order, the candidate was draped about the shoulders in a linen shroud. Something about symbolizing death, then resurrecting into a new life as a Templar. You, too, will now have that honor. I have laid out beneath you the shroud from the chest in the chapel." Imbert reached down and folded the long herringbone cloth over de Molay's feet, down the length of his damp body. His gaze was now shielded by the cloth. "I am told this was used by the Order in the Holy Land, brought back here and wrapped around every Paris initiate. You are now reborn," Imbert mocked. "Lie here and think about your sins. I shall return."

De Molay was too weak to respond. He knew that Imbert had most

likely been ordered not to kill him, but he also realized that no one was going to care for him. So he lay still. The numbness was receding, replaced by an intense agony. His heart still pounded and he was sweating frightening amounts of moisture. He told himself to calm down and think pleasant thoughts. One that kept coming to mind was what he knew his captors wanted to know above all else. He was the only man alive who knew. That was the way of the Order. One master passed the knowledge to the next in a way that only the next would know. Unfortunately, because of his sudden arrest and the purge of the Order, the passing this time would have to be accomplished another way. He would not allow Philip or the Church to win. They would only learn what he knew when he wanted them to know. What had the Psalm said? *Thy tongue deviseth mischiefs like a sharp razor, working deceitfully.*

But then another biblical passage occurred to him, one that brought a measure of comfort to his beleaguered soul. So as he lay wrapped in the shroud, his body pouring forth blood and sweat, he thought of Deuteronomy.

Let me alone, that I may destroy them.

PART ONE



ONE

COPENHAGEN, DENMARK
THURSDAY, JUNE 22, THE PRESENT
2:50 PM

COTTON MALONE SPOTTED THE KNIFE AT THE SAME TIME HE SAW Stephanie Nelle. He was sitting at a table outside the Café Nikolaj, comfortable in a white lattice chair. The sunny afternoon was pleasant and Højbro Plads, the popular Danish square that spanned out before him, bristled with people. The café was doing its usual brisk business—the mood feverish—and for the past half hour he'd been waiting for Stephanie.

She was a petite woman, in her sixties, though she never confirmed her age and the Justice Department personnel records that Malone once saw contained only a winking N/A in the space reserved for date of birth. Her dark hair was streaked with waves of silver, and her brown eyes offered both the compassionate look of a liberal and the fiery glint of a prosecutor. Two presidents had tried to make her attorney general, but she'd turned both offers down. One attorney general had lobbied hard to fire her—especially after she was enlisted by the FBI to investigate him—but the White House nixed the idea since, among other things, Stephanie Nelle was scrupulously honest.

In contrast, the man with the knife was short and stout, with narrow features and brush-cut hair. Something haunted loomed on his East European face—a forlornness that worried Malone more than the

glistening blade—and he was dressed casually in denim pants and a blood-red jacket.

Malone rose from his seat but kept his eyes trained on Stephanie.

He thought of shouting a warning, but she was too far away and there was too much noise between them. His view of her was momentarily blocked by one of the modernistic sculptures that dotted Højbro Plads—this one of an obscenely obese woman, lying naked on her belly, her obtrusive buttocks rounded like windswept mountains. When Stephanie appeared from the other side of the cast bronze, the man with the knife had moved closer and Malone watched as he severed a strap that draped her left shoulder, jerked a leather bag free, then shoved Stephanie to the flagstones.

A woman screamed and commotion erupted at the sight of a purse snatcher brandishing a knife.

Red Jacket rushed ahead, Stephanie's bag in hand, and shouldered people out of his way. A few pushed back. The thief angled left, around another of the bronzed sculptures, and finally broke into a run. His route seemed aimed at Købmagergade, a pedestrian-only lane that twisted north, out of Højbro Plads, deeper into the city's shopping district.

Malone bounded from the table, determined to cut off the assailant before he could turn the corner, but a cluster of bicycles blocked his way. He circled the cycles and sprinted forward, partially orbiting a fountain before tackling his prey.

They slammed into hard stone, Red Jacket taking most of the impact, and Malone immediately noticed that his opponent was muscular. Red Jacket, undaunted by the attack, rolled once, then brought a knee into Malone's stomach.

The breath left him in a rush and his guts churned.

Red Jacket sprang to his feet and raced up Købmagergade.

Malone stood, but instantly crouched over and sucked a couple of shallow breaths.

Damn. He was out of practice.

He caught hold of himself and resumed pursuit, his quarry now possessing a fifty-foot head start. Malone had not seen the knife during their struggle, but as he plowed up the street between shops he saw that

the man still grasped the leather bag. His chest burned, but he was closing the gap.

Red Jacket wrenched a flower cart away from a scraggly old man, one of many carts that lined both Højbro Plads and Købmagergade. Malone hated the vendors, who enjoyed blocking his bookshop, especially on Saturdays. Red Jacket flung the cart down the cobbles in Malone's direction. He could not let the cart run free—too many people on the street, including children—so he darted right, grasped hold, and twisted it to a stop.

He glanced back and saw Stephanie round the corner onto Købmagergade, along with a policeman. They were half a football field away, and he had no time to wait.

Malone dashed ahead, wondering where the man was heading. Perhaps he'd left a vehicle, or a driver was waiting where Købmagergade emptied into another of Copenhagen's busy squares, Hauser Plads. He hoped not. That place was a nightmare of congestion, beyond the web of people-only lanes that formed the shoppers' mecca known as Strøget. His thighs ached from the unexpected workout, the muscles barely recalling his days with the Navy and the Justice Department. After a year of voluntary retirement, his exercise regimen would not impress his former employer.

Ahead loomed the Round Tower, nestled firmly against the Trinity Church like a thermos bound to a lunch pail. The burly cylindrical structure rose nine stories. Denmark's Christian IV had erected it in 1642, and the symbol of his reign—a gilded 4 embraced by a C—glistened on its somber brick edifice. Five streets intersected where the Round Tower stood, and Red Jacket could choose any one of them for his escape.

Police cars appeared.

One screeched to a stop on the south side of the Round Tower. Another came from farther down Købmagergade, blocking any escape to the north. Red Jacket was now contained in the plaza that encircled the Round Tower. His quarry hesitated, seeming to appraise the situation, then scampered right and disappeared inside the Round Tower.

What was the fool doing? There was no way out besides the ground-floor portal. But maybe Red Jacket didn't know that.

Malone ran to the entrance. He knew the man in the ticket booth. The Norwegian spent many hours in Malone's bookshop, English literature his passion.

"Arne, where did that man go?" he asked in Danish, catching his wind.

"Ran right by without paying."

"Anybody up there?"

"An older couple went up a little while ago."

No elevator or stairs led to the top. Instead, a spiral causeway wound a path straight to the summit, originally installed so that bulky seventeenth-century astronomical instruments could be wheeled up. The story local tour guides liked to tell was of how Russia's Peter the Great once rode up on horseback while his empress followed in a carriage.

Malone could hear footfalls echoing from the flooring above. He shook his head at what he knew awaited him. "Tell the police we're up there."

He started to run.

Halfway up the spiraling incline he passed a door leading into the Large Hall. The glassed entrance was locked, the lights off. Ornamented double windows lined the tower's outer walls, but each was iron-barred. He listened again and could still hear running from above.

He continued ahead, his breathing growing thick and hampered. He slowed his pace when he passed a medieval planet plotter affixed high on the wall. He knew the exit onto the roof platform was just a few feet away, around the ramp's final bend.

He heard no more footsteps.

He crept forward and stepped through the archway. An octagonal observatory—not from Christian IV's time, but a more recent incarnation—rose in the center, with a wide terrace encircling.

To his left a decorative iron fence surrounded the observatory, its only entrance chained shut. On his right, intricate wrought-iron latticework lined the tower's outer edge. Beyond the low railing loomed the city's red-tiled rooftops and green spires.

He rounded the platform and found an elderly man lying prone.

Behind the body, Red Jacket stood with a knife to an older woman's throat, his arm encasing her chest. She seemed to want to scream, but fear quelled her voice.

"Keep still," Malone said to her in Danish.

He studied Red Jacket. The haunted look was still there in the dark, almost mournful eyes. Beads of sweat glistened in the bright sun. Everything signaled that Malone should not step any closer. Footfalls from below signaled that the police would arrive in a few moments.

"How about you cool down?" he asked, trying English.

He could see the man understood him, but the knife stayed in place. Red Jacket's gaze kept darting away, off to the sky then back. He seemed unsure of himself and that concerned Malone even more. Desperate people always did desperate things.

"Put the knife down. The police are coming. There's no way out."

Red Jacket looked to the sky again, then refocused on Malone. Indecision stared back at him. What was this? A purse snatcher who flees to the top of a hundred-foot tower with nowhere to go?

Footfalls from below grew louder.

"The police are here."

Red Jacket backed closer to the iron railing but kept his grip tight on the elderly woman. Malone sensed the steeliness of an ultimatum forcing some choice, so he made clear again, "There's no way out."

Red Jacket tightened his grip on the woman's chest, then he staggered back, now firmly against the waist-high outer railing, nothing beyond him and his hostage but air.

The eyes lost their panic and a sudden calm swept over the man. He shoved the old woman forward and Malone caught her before she lost her balance. Red Jacket made the sign of the cross and, with Stephanie's bag in hand, pivoted out over the railing, screamed one word—*"beauseant"*—then slashed the knife across his throat as his body plunged to the street.

The woman howled as the police emerged from the portal.

Malone let her go and rushed to the rail.

Red Jacket lay sprawled on the cobbles one hundred feet below.

He turned and looked back to the sky, past the flagpole atop the ob-

servatory, the Danish Dannebrog—a white cross upon a red banner—limp in the still air.

What had the man been looking at? And why did he jump?

He gazed back down and saw Stephanie elbowing her way through the growing crowd. Her leather bag lay a few feet from the dead man and he watched as she yanked it from the cobbles, then dissolved back into the spectators. He followed her with his gaze as she plowed through the people and scuttled away, down one of the streets that led from the Round Tower, deeper into the busy Strøget, never looking back.

He shook his head at her hasty retreat and muttered, "What the hell?"